

Alter Egoing: The Shifting Affects of Janelle Monáe

by Larissa Irizarry | Randy Martin Prize, Issue 11.1 (Spring 2022)

ABSTRACT In this article, I use alter egoing as a heuristic, a method for solving the problem of the evolving alter egos of Black women in popular music. When alter egos are analyzed through this lens, the refashioning of artistic imaginaries become legible as intellectual labor. The intellectual labor that Janelle Monáe primarily provides are critiques of notions of womanhood and Blackness in the United States. I understand Monáe's alter egoing as a reaction to the affective political strategies mobilized in US electoral politics. Former President Barack Obama developed an affective strategy based on his personal brand of optimism, first presented in his book *The Audacity of Hope* (2006). He developed his signature optimistic politics while he was a senator and he continued to promote his "audacious hopefulness" into his 2008 presidential campaign. Former President Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign also utilized an affective political strategy, as he rallied his supporters around culturally white (male) nostalgia with the cry, "Make America Great Again." I track the affective evolution of Monáe's alter egoing from pessimism to optimism in the context of the anti-Black populisms of the post-Obama era (2016–), culminating in a close reading of her 2018 album, *Dirty Computer*. In identifying Monáe's troubled relationship with notions of normative identity through her first alter ego, I evaluate the relevance of posthumanism and Afrofuturism, which scholars have used to critique American notions of race, gender, and sexuality. In analyzing the shift in affect from her first alter ego to her most recent, I detect in Monáe's alter egoing a critical optimism, a disidentifying strategy that begins to take shape in *Dirty Computer*.

KEYWORDS Black feminism, queer, Afropessimism, Afrofuturism, alter egos

"Who is Cindi Mayweather?" the CNET interviewer asks Janelle Monáe.¹ Monáe takes a dramatic pause, slowly turns to face the camera, as though attached to a dolly, mechanically pivoting towards the audience, and she says in monotone, "Hello, I am Janelle Monáe." Her face softens, her natural timbre returns, "and also Cindi Mayweather . . . I am half human, part droid."² This performative tactic in interviews is characteristic of Janelle Monáe's public self-presentation across a career that spans almost two decades. It has historically been difficult to separate the android alter ego from Janelle Monáe the person.

The already porous boundary between Monáe and Cindi Mayweather is further muddled when she explains to interviewers that, "I only date androids."³

I've been intrigued by Janelle Monáe's ambiguous relationship to the convoluted narrative of her android alter ego since her 2007 debut EP, but it was the 2018 refashioning of her alter ego in *Dirty Computer* that instigated my study of alter egos.⁴ When I watched the nearly fifty-minute visual album for the first time, I remember being struck by the distinct, almost jarring shift in Monáe's persona from her previous albums, from the physically rigid yet frenetic Cindi to the sensuously punk Jane57821. As I familiarized myself with Jane57821 of *Dirty Computer* and compared her with the android Cindi Mayweather of the *Metropolis Suites* I knew so well (as a longtime fan), I detected a choreographed evolution in Monáe's affective strategy, or what I call *alter egoing*.⁵

In my work on Black women in popular music, I use alter egoing as a heuristic, a method for solving the problem of the shifting, evolving, and unstable personality or persona. When such alternate personalities or personas are analyzed through the lens of alter egoing, the refashioning of artistic imaginaries—by which I mean the world-building connected to the alter ego through implied backstories and identifiable narrative—become legible as intellectual labor. The intellectual labor that Monáe primarily provides are critiques of notions of womanhood and Blackness in the United States.⁶

Before I continue, it is important to note that I make a distinction between the alter egos used in Janelle Monáe's *Metropolis Suites* and in *Dirty Computer*. The alter ego Cindi Mayweather, in my analysis, belongs to the *Metropolis Suites*, which include an EP released in 2007, and her two following albums released in 2010 and 2013.⁷ Although used somewhat interchangeably with Cindi Mayweather in these earlier albums, I locate the Jane57821 alter ego in the 2018 visual album *Dirty Computer* in order to delineate what I perceive as a shift in alter egoing.⁸

I understand Monáe's alter egoing as a reaction to the affective political strategies mobilized in electoral politics in the United States, the transformation of her alter egos indicative of shared, social feelings that evolve according to contemporary political events.⁹ Former President Barack Obama developed an affective strategy based on his personal brand of optimism, first presented in his book *The Audacity of Hope* (the title of which is an adaptation from Jeremiah Wright's 1988 sermon "Audacity to Hope").¹⁰ He developed his signature optimistic, hopeful politics while he was a senator and he continued to promote his "audacious hopefulness" into his 2008 presidential campaign. Former President Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign also utilized an affective political strategy, as he rallied his supporters around culturally white (male) nostalgia with the cry, "Make America Great Again."¹¹

In this article, I track the affective evolution of Monáe's *alter egoing* from pessimism to optimism in the context of the anti-Black populisms of the post-Obama era (2016–), culminating in a close reading of her 2018 album, *Dirty Computer* in the context of Trumpian nostalgia (signified by his campaign slogan, "Make America Great Again"). I first explore Cindi Mayweather's relationship to race, gender, and sexuality. The sonic and visual aesthetics of the *Metropolis Suites* expose the racialized and queer features of the seemingly post-race heteronormative Cindi Mayweather. In identifying Cindi Mayweather's troubled relationship with notions of normative identity (read, white cis-heterosexuality), I will evaluate the relevance of posthumanism and Afrofuturism, which scholars have used to critique American notions of race, gender, and sexuality. I conclude by noting the pros and cons of strategies that rely on either universality or specificity. I will offer *critical optimism* as an alternative, a strategy that Monáe begins to construct through her alter egoing in *Dirty Computer*.

From the lyrics of Monáe's songs (e.g. "Mr. President") to the visuals of her visual albums (e.g. "Pynk's" intertextual critique of Trump's infamous "grab them by the pussy" comment), a calculated shift in affect emerged contemporaneously with the election of the first Black president of the United States and the cultural backlash to his election. The significance of this chronology is the contemporaneous emergence of rhetorics of white (male) nostalgia, propelled by anti-Black populisms. As I investigate the evolution of Monáe's alter egoing, I argue that her most recent affective strategy, critical optimism, is a strategic update from her prior Afropessimist orientation.

Cindi Mayweather as All-inclusive Heroine or Racialized Subject

"Who is Cindi Mayweather?" This is one of the most frequently asked questions of Janelle Monáe and of her music, to which she almost as frequently responds that Cindi represents, "all who are marginalized."¹² Mobilizing the supposed universality of an alien android, Monáe crafted an alter ego to meet the need for non-normative representation in American popular music. In this same spirit, Monáe explains that her use of the nickname "Q.U.E.E.N.," (for herself and her "electric lady" cohort of her 2013 album), is an acronym for "the queer community, untouchables, emigrants, excommunicated and those labeled negroid."¹³ Monáe's use of the android emphasizes her project to be an all-inclusive heroine, an attempt to be relevant to whoever considered themselves not represented by contemporary popular music artists.¹⁴ Cindi Mayweather, by default, featured a lack of specificity that, in some ways, blunted the subversive nature of the alter egoing. Media scholar Dan Hassler-Forest addresses what he sees as neoliberal maneuvering. Although ultimately evaluating her work as helping consumers and fans think beyond the confines of

capitalist realism, Hassler-Forest ascribes much of Mon e's success to her compatibility with the cultural logic of neoliberal capitalism. I argue further that this approach can be understood as a neoliberal maneuver shaped by Obamian hopefulness, a post-race optimism.

Cindi Mayweather's all-inclusive marginality via the metaphor of the android belies a commentary on Blackness. In the song "Violet Stars, Happy Hunting!!!" Cindi Mayweather sings:

I'm a slave girl without a race
On the run cause they're here to erase
And chase out my kind.

Despite this nominal denial of race, Janelle Mon e circumvents the post-racial rhetoric with an analogy: an android illegally in love with a human. Because of her illegal intimacies, Cindi Mayweather is sentenced for disassembly. She's forcibly sent back to our time and becomes a messiah figure known as the ArchAndroid.

A prime example of the subtextual racialization of Cindi Mayweather can be found in *The Metropolis* hit single "Many Moons." The entire music video revolves around an event that is a cross between a concert, a fashion show, and an auction. The event is introduced by the auctioneer as "The Annual Android Auction." As she begins to describe the androids for sale, she is accompanied by a lyrical orchestral string melody set against a guitar plucking a descending bass tetrachord. The instrumentation and melody do not particularly signify Blackness, however, an assortment of horns enter on the fifth repetition of the descending tetrachord with an ascending fifth and an electric organ becomes a part of the instrumentation soon thereafter; these shifts in instrumentation gesture towards 1960s big band, with a twist of Black church and funk.

Clones of Cindi Mayweather await their turn to walk the auction runway in their various costumes and wigs. The original Cindi Mayweather, "The Alpha Platinum 9000," steps onto the center stage that is flanked by the runway. The bidding begins. She and her bandmates begin their performance for the auction patrons as she watches her likeness being bought and sold. What could conjure a neo-slave narrative more than rows of Cindi Mayweather androids lining up to walk the auction block?¹⁵

In "Many Moons," Cindi literally performs race. Before mounting the music stage overlooking the humanoid products for sale, Cindi, her android body a synthetic pearly white, pushes a button located at her temple and suddenly her white visage switches to a natural melanated hue (see Figure 1). In a literal sense, race is a technology Cindi uses to fulfill her prescribed role as racialized musical entertainer. Furthermore, she uses Black musical topoi, Black stereotypes, and queer Black language. Funk grooves and rap breaks

tie Cindi Mayweather to the urban Black American music. When she sings “we eat wangs and throw them bones on the ground,” she takes pride in a Southern Black heritage. Despite the claim that Cindi Mayweather is ambiguously marginalized, her marginality is further specified by the lyrics “serving face” (in the song “Q.U.E.E.N.”), which connects her to queer Blackness, a preview of Monáe’s coming out as a queer Black woman a decade later.



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Picture1.png> >



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Picture2.png> >

Figure 1. Cindi Mayweather before and after switching on her Black skin prior to the Annual Android Auction in the “Many Moons” music video.

Monáe’s elision of race, with a protagonist that both explicitly refuses to comment on race and at the same time be so transparently consumed by it, spoke to the political moment in which some Black people found themselves during an era of supposed color blindness. Ellis Cashmore, in his work on celebrity and Beyoncé, maintains that, “After 11 September 2001, Americans became more preoccupied with emphasizing their similarities rather than differences.”¹⁶ The lyrics and musical topoi in the *Metropolis Suites*, and in “Many Moons” in particular, subvert Cindi Mayweather’s claim of all-inclusive, post-racial identity. Thus, Cindi Mayweather attempts to circulate in an Obama world of supposed post-raciality, and yet her subtextual connection to Blackness belies her gestures towards universality.

From *Metropolis* to *Dirty Computer*, Monáe uses what Faedra Chatard Carpenter calls “whiteface.” Carpenter theorizes six types of whiteface: tinted whiteface, optic whiteface, nonconforming whiteface, naturalized whiteface, linguistic whiteface, and presumed aural whiteface.¹⁷ Before Cindi Mayweather turns on her Blackness in “Many Moons,” she could be said to be performing optic whiteface. Carpenter defines optic whiteface as the absence of color—a performed whiteness that is visually opaque, paintlike, and bright white. “Many Moons” demonstrates optic whiteface, as does Beyoncé’s 2013 song “Mine” in which she cradles the head of a person whose entire body is painted synthetic white (see Figure 2).



<https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Picture3.png>

Figure 2. Beyoncé in the music video "Mine" from Beyoncé (2013) cradling the head of someone whose entire body is painted synthetic white, enacting optic whiteface, a racial performance that is only further emphasized by the whiteface mask in Beyoncé's left hand.

By contrast, tinted whiteface is featured in Monáe's "Q.U.E.E.N." from *The Electric Lady* (2013), another song from the Metropolis Trilogy. Carpenter defines tinted whiteface as an intentionally unnatural racial performance that "underscores the constructed nature of imagined whiteness, thereby suggesting the possibility of racial mixture and/or the impossibility of racial purity."¹⁸ The music video for this song first starts with a monologue delivered by a sonically white speaker (later confirmed by their appearance on a monitor) accompanied by classical western art music diegetically playing in the background. We are introduced to a museum, the "Living Museum, where legendary rebels throughout history are frozen in suspended animation," an obvious reference to Cindi's ArchAndroid ability to time travel. The camera cuts to the suspended rebels, the first frames resting on the bodies of two figures covered in white, chalky powder (see Figure 3).



<https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Picture4.png>

Figure 3. Two rebels frozen in suspended animation, enacting tinted whiteface in the music video "Q.U.E.E.N." from Janelle Monáe's *The Electric Lady* (2013).

As Cindi gets ready to take to the stage in "Many Moons," she turns off her optic whiteface and powers on her Blackness. She then frantically dances between styles that allude to James Brown, Michael Jackson, and Prince. Just as she literally turns on her Blackness to become who the audience expects her to be, she desperately negotiates between performance signifiers of Blackness as though she must be all Black stereotypes to all people.

Musicologist Nina Sun Eidsheim theorizes what it means for a voice to "be Black" in America. According to Eidsheim's formulation, the voice is collective, the voice is cultural, and the voice's source comes from the listener. In other words, the voice is defined solely outside of itself.¹⁹ The audio-vocal dialectic, wherein the voice is constructed only in terms of how it is understood by the listener, is what Eidsheim calls the "thick event."²⁰ "Many Moons" sonically evokes Blackness through this dialectic, but also with the instrumentation that plays in the background while the auctioneer introduces the android product.²⁰ Once Cindi Mayweather does start to sing, the homorhythmic vocal harmonies that join her stylistically gesture towards gospel choir, but this is an inference primarily made by the audience who looks upon the choir of droids, rows of Cindi Mayweather look-alikes, accompanied by a keyboard set to electric organ, adding to the thick event that is sonic Black church. The cultural constructedness of sonic and visual Blackness is further emphasized by rows of identical Cindi androids flanked in organized formation behind the auction stage, waiting to be sold. They sing in a chordal texture "Your freedom's in a bind." They project their sentiment outward, but it is an obvious indictment of their own servitude to the bourgeois non-droid flesh bodies that have purchasing power over their android selves.

The troubled nature and clear dissonance of the emotion picture whole—the music, vocality, and lyrics—work to complicate Cindi Mayweather's message and blur the distinction between the alter ego and the artist, Janelle Monáe. Through Cindi Mayweather, Monáe circumvented post-racial rhetoric with a metaphor too thin to veil its true meaning. Monáe's creation of a story concerning the illegality of love between android and human is an obvious metaphor for the historical restriction of miscegenation, the interbreeding of people considered to be of different races, in the United States. In contemporary times, the story of Cindi Mayweather is a commentary on the regulation of non-normative people and their intimate attachments.

Cindi Mayweather's Subversion through Queer Dandyism

Cindi Mayweather, and consequently Monáe herself, has been understood by some fans and scholars as adhering to respectability politics.²¹ The main evidence offered as support for this stance is her modest mode of dress: a black and white suit (see Figure 4). In this line of argument, her austere dress and the absence of sexually explicit lyrics in her music form a meaningful contrast with such unrespectable, "ratchet" artists as Nicki Minaj and Cardi B.²²



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Picture5.png> >

Figure 4. Janelle Monáe (or Cindi Mayweather) in the "Many Moons" music video, dressed in her iconic black and white suit.

Even though Monáe has explicitly disavowed respectability, her early alter egoing through Cindi Mayweather appears to blur the boundary between respectability and disrespectability politics, destabilizing the binary rather than entirely overturning it. Inscribing respectability politics onto Monáe presupposes heterosexuality and monogamy, two social norms that Cindi Mayweather in fact never overtly contradicts (though these norms are later directly flouted by Monáe's Jane57821).²³ Cindi Mayweather's assumed monogamy and the heteronormative presentation of her romantic attachment may unwittingly align Monáe's early alter egoing with homonormativity, a queer kind of respectability.²⁴

Respectability politics has been a useful strategy of survival for Black Americans in the United States, but, to summarize Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Black women's adherence to respectability does not promise freedom from oppression. Aisha Durham, Brittney C.

Cooper, and Susana M. Morris identify the potential political progress that is undercut by respectability politics because of its employment of surveillance, control, and repression that reinscribes white capitalist heteropatriarchy.²⁵ Understanding respectability politics as an instrument of heteronormative regulation and homonormative self-regulation, Carmel Ohman goes so far as to call respectability politics an anti-Black and misogynist disciplinary mechanism, a *misogynoir* mechanism.²⁶

Aside from Monáe's explicit denial of respectability politics and her accusation of such a label as an attempt to police her queer Blackness, features of her alter egoing counter the premises of respectability. First, respectability politics was used to differentiate "proper" middle class Black people from the poor working class. Monáe's signature black and white is worn as an homage to the poor working class, by evoking the uniform used by those in service industries.²⁷ Furthermore, the tux that Monáe dons contradicts respectability's heteronormative regulation through its temporally queer and gender-ambiguous references. Although Monáe is femme-presenting for most of the awards season, Cindi Mayweather's various black and white outfits mix styles from eighteenth-century fashion to 1950s fashion, and the cut of the tuxes lean towards a soft butch or stud aesthetic.

Monáe's early signature look is an essential key to understanding her subversive, queer nature that was not made explicit until the release of *Dirty Computer*. Her mode of dress aligns with a queer icon of the 1930s, another Black performer known for her gender-queer costume of the suit, Gladys Bentley. Bentley's use of the suit, which has been anachronistically labelled as queer, is connected to the practice of Black dandyism. A. J. Hamilton describes Black dandyism as a "sartorial aesthetic rooted in fine clothing and tailoring, a cosmopolitan sensibility, and a sophisticated affinity for culture and art" which practically materialized as the three-piece suit.²⁸ Black dandyism was used by early twentieth-century Black men to combat harmful stereotypes. Through their dandyism, Black men exhibited refinement and cosmopolitanism in hopes to dispel the belief that they were by default uneducated and savage. Their mode of dress and specifically the perceived all-consuming interest in their own lovely masculinity was hoped to give the impression to onlookers of a lack of interest in women, which worked against the rapacious Black man stereotype.

This very brief summary of Black dandyism seems to apply more readily to the frequent musical collaborator of Wondaland, the "classic man" Jidenna, than to Monáe herself. However, according to Hamilton's study on the semiotics of the suit, Black dandyism, and the queering of it by Black women, has its own resistance history. It is important to note that the masculine strategy of Black dandyism was firmly situated in the practice of critical race theorists, or "race men." The critical race studies canon is populated by such Black dandies as W. E. B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, and in contemporary times, Cornel West. Black

women are implicitly erased in West's belief that access to agency and freedom from marginalization is obtained by way of the dress and demeanor of the "Victorian male"²⁹ Within this visual rhetoric that aligns suited masculinity with epistemological prowess, Monáe's sartorial wearing of the suit queers this strategy and carves a distinct space for deviant participation in Black intellectual elitism. Furthermore, both of these women's mixture of icons—Bentley's pairing of the top hat and suit with a skirt and heels, and Monáe's mix of eighteenth-century and 1950s fashion—calls attention to the "process of reading and being read."³⁰ This queering of Black dandyism is an oppositional gaze of sorts that at once returns the Black dandy gaze upon itself and forces acknowledgement of female dandies.

Another of Hamilton's astute observations of Bentley provides insight into the emancipatory potential of Cindi Mayweather's suited alter egoing: "Her dandyism rejected the dominant fashion culture's primitivist fetishization of the Black female body and rejected the Black intelligentsia's view of racial progress as a masculine-centered endeavor."³¹ In the spirit of Bentley's co-option of the three-piece suit as both rejecting the current culture's fetishization of the Black female body and refusing the Harlem Renaissance's male-centric view of racial progress, Monáe maintains that she will not be restricted by heterosexist norms and that her music serves to "[weed] out folks who tried to place me in their little, safe category."³² Respectability is one of those safe categories, which her mode of dress contradicts, as her iconic black and white suit pays homage to service workers and participates in queer dandyism.

Cindi Mayweather and the Implicit Whiteness of Posthumanism

Monáe's practice of using an otherworldly alter ego in the *Metropolis Suites* and its alien androgyny forces her into dialogue with posthumanism, with white queer artists and their alien alter egos, and with male Afrofuturist alter egos. Monáe's reliance on the alien android connects her to posthumanist discourse, particularly Donna Haraway's essay "A Cyborg Manifesto." Posthumanism, and specifically Haraway's cyberfeminism, subconsciously presupposes whiteness in its reliance on universalizing rhetoric. Haraway suggests that feminists should move beyond naturalism and essentialism, criticizing feminist tactics as "identity politics" that victimize those excluded, and she proposes that it is better strategically to confuse identities.³³ Haraway's unmarked whiteness allows her to call for the non-essentialized metaphor of the cyborg in the name of coalition.³⁴ Haraway's cyborg morphology comes at great cost (most notably the erasure of Afrofuturism) for women of color who rely on Black sisterhoods and afro-ancestral lineages and mythologies.

Cindi Mayweather's alter egoing is also imperfectly grouped with white artists who use alien alter egos. I've already noted the ways that Cindi Mayweather's heteronormative, "respectable" presentation is subverted by subtle signifiers of queerness. Cindi Mayweather is further removed from heteronormativity by her otherworldly, alien nature. Cindi's alienness aligns her with the queer practice of such artists as avant-garde countertenor Klaus Nomi and glam rocker David Bowie. In the words of author Alex Benson,

The alien metaphor repackages a queer experience for mass consumption in a straight world—a red herring encasing a secret message to social misfits everywhere. It wraps aesthetic intention around behaviors and body language usually mocked. It's not gay, it's avant-garde.³⁵

Cindi Mayweather's connection to white gender-bending figures is a one-dimensional link. These figures (Nomi and Bowie) needed the alien metaphor to operate in a straight world. Monáe, a queer Black woman, contrived an alien, android alter ego that is as oppressed in Metropolis as her creator is in the real world.

Despite the critical difference between a white man's androgyny and Monáe's intersectional queering of the alter ego, it isn't hard to see the similarities between David Bowie's Ziggy Stardust and Janelle Monáe's Cindi Mayweather: they both figure as messiah, they both bring a message of hope through song, they both come from another planet, they both are queer subjects. The key difference between Ziggy Stardust and Cindi Mayweather is the subtextual Du Boisian struggle of the *Metropolis Suites*.

Although futuristic alter egos (specifically from the 1970s funk and glam rock scene) have functioned as a way to create alternate realities that are hospitable to queer bodies and temporalities—such as George Clinton's Starchild and Dr. Funkenstein, Lou Reed's the Phantom of Rock, and the aforementioned Ziggy Stardust—the reality crafted for Cindi Mayweather is not a hospitable world free of oppression. Janelle Monáe's alter egoing does not create a more inclusive world, but rather, illuminates the injustices of the real world. Cindi Mayweather did not function as a suspension of reality but an emphasis of the universality of violence on all "those who are marginalized."³⁶

Earlier iterations of alter egos, especially from the funk and glam genres, function as performative affirmations of post-human identity, but at this early stage of Monáe's alter egoing such affirmation was not a part of her world-building schema in the *Metropolis Suites*. Contrary to Monáe's claim to all-inclusive representation, I argue that the story of Cindi Mayweather emphasizes how Black women do not or are not able to perform separate from their intersectional identities, alter egos notwithstanding. Cindi's narrative subverts oppressive forces by exposing its violence, both subtle and extreme.

Thus, Cindi the alien android circulates in what would seem to be the Obama world of Janelle Monáe, with alter egoing that responds to the supposed post-raciality of the United States in her self-denial of the racialized body, and yet she is unable to uncouple herself from racialization. The tenuous omission of race from Janelle Monáe's first version of alter egoing in turn becomes an Afropessimist commentary on the negation of the Black body.³⁷ Monáe expressed universality through the android narrative, and yet preserved her own Blackness by using examples of oppression specific to her community.

Cindi Mayweather's Afropessimist Political Affect

Afropessimism has a couple of different definitions. Scholar of African American studies Frank Wilderson describes Afropessimism as a theoretical positioning of Black people as structural props, with the sole purpose of fulfilling white and non-Black fantasies.³⁸ Cindi Mayweather's purported universality is strangely wedded to both sonic and visual signifiers of Blackness, a coupling that invokes a pessimism that seems to suggest that not all oppression is analogous to anti-Blackness. Cindi Mayweather's cognitive dissonance thus becomes a metaphor for how Black people are "positioned, contained, and punished, both excluded from and necessary to the category of the Human."³⁹ I understand this form of alter egoing as not just promoting Afropessimism, but a politicized affect, an affective strategy stemming from Afropessimism, an Afropessimist orientation that contrasts with Obama's audacious, hopeful optimism.

In politicizing the term affect, most obviously in the use of the terms "political affect," I call on Jennifer C. Nash's definition of affect as, "how bodies are organized around intensities, longings, desires, temporalities, repulsions, curiosities, fatigues, optimism, and how these affects produce political movements (or sometimes inertias)."⁴⁰ To reiterate, Obama developed his own brand of affect, a signature optimistic politics to which Monáe's alter egoing reacts. Thus, the evolution of Cindi Mayweather demonstrates how shared, social feelings evolve according to contemporary political events.⁴¹

Cindi Mayweather's assessment of freedom in "Many Moons," with the lyrics "Your freedom's in a bind," strikes a dissonant chord in what some have called the era of post-race audacious hopefulness in America. The dissonance increased with the crucial rise in awareness of police brutality only weeks into Obama's administration. In January 2009, in Oakland, California Johannes Mehserle, a transit officer, shot the 22-year-old unarmed Black man Oscar Grant. The brutality of the murder of a young man, handcuffed and lying face down on the public transportation platform, extinguished much of the optimism generated from the Democratic win of the White House. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor writes in *The Guardian*:

The optimism that coursed through Black America in 2008 seemed a million miles away As for President Obama, he turned out to be very different from candidate Obama, who had stage-managed his campaign to resemble something closer to a social movement. He had conjured much hope, especially among African Americans—but with great expectations came even greater disappointments.⁴²

Having a Black president does not automatically eradicate racism in the United States or validate the claim that America is post-racial, a fact emphasized by the widely publicized murder of a Black man at the hands of a white man. In an obvious address to the contemporary political environment that proved the fallacy of a post-racial America, Cindi Mayweather pleads in her song “Mr. President,” singing,

Hey Mr. President,
Don't you see the hurt in their eyes?
So much disappointment in many faces
Use your heart and not your pride
We can't go on and keep pretending.

Despite the critique that Cindi Mayweather is a protagonist packaged for the masses, her obvious critique of Obama, a Black man who has become a beacon of hope to many aspiring people of color, counters the idea that she is a mere neoliberal cog in the American political landscape. Black women have been traditionally discouraged from bringing Black men to task due to “the indignities of life in a racist society,” as explained by Kimberlé Crenshaw, and they've been encouraged to “protect the home against assaults outside the home.”⁴³ Where Black women have been discouraged from harshly critiquing Black men because of America's system of racism that is swift to accuse, sentence, and incarcerate Black men, Cindi Mayweather provides a fair critique that neither takes away from Obama's feat of becoming the first non-white president, nor skirts around his neglect of those who have been negatively impacted during his tenure.

Jane57821's Critical Optimism in Response to White (Male) Nostalgia

Some criticisms of Afropessimism include its nominal pessimistic bent and its US-centrism. It is contended that Afropessimism subverts the kind of actionable hope that builds the coalition needed in the fight against anti-Blackness. Afropessimism tends to conflate Blackness and the history of chattel slavery in the US, thus erasing other Black freedom struggles that do not stem from US history of slavery.⁴⁴ In my invocation of critical optimism, I do not intend to disable the utility of Afropessimism. In my analysis of Jane57821, I understand Monáe's critical optimism as informed by the Afropessimist tradition but reacting to the pull of politicized affects in the Obama/post-Obama era. It is

interesting that just as Monáe became more specific in her alter egoing via *Dirty Computer*'s Jane57821, with such lyrics as "Black girl magic," she promotes an orientation of critical optimism, which stands in contrast to Cindi Mayweather's Afropessimism.

Political culture is intertwined with affect (e.g. shame evoked by President Bush's response to Hurricane Katrina). The evolution of Monáe's alter egoing maps the affective terrain of the Obama/post-Obama era. The shift from Cindi Mayweather to Jane57824 happened simultaneously with the shift in rhetorics of hope and nostalgia circulating in electoral politics and seemed to expose how these politicized affects align some subjects and antagonize others.⁴⁵ Moreover, Monáe's shift from Afropessimism in the era of Obamian optimism to critical optimism during a time of acute white (male) nostalgia exposes how emotions move between body-politics.

Whereas Cindi Mayweather acted as an Afropessimist critique of Obama's audacious hope and belief in America as post-racial, Jane57821 confronts Trump's white (male) nostalgia with critical optimism. Critical optimism is an affective strategy that stands in contrast to the US political affective context of nostalgia for the past and pessimistic mourning for the future.

The performative political practice of critical optimism that I theorize through Monáe's alter going is influenced by Leboeuf's interrogation of Obama's audacious hope, Berlant's analysis of political affect and genre, and Snediker's queer optimism.⁴⁶ In combining these theories, I understand *alter egoing* as the practice of crafting a unique narrative wherein artists who are Black women can defy the futures and outcomes that have been designated to them.

The function of Monáe's alter egoing shifts from Cindi Mayweather to Jane57821 as her oeuvre matures from the *Metropolis Suites* to *Dirty Computer*. The postmodern, intertextual complexity of the *Metropolis Suites*, which references cultural works as wide-ranging as the 1928 German expressionist film *Metropolis* to Lewis Carroll's novel *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), are again present in *Dirty Computer*. These references range from Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* to speeches by Malcom X and Martin Luther King.⁴⁷ By way of alter egoing, Monáe negotiates pessimism and optimism through intimate stories of state-condemned deviance and the violence of surveillance.

A decade after the release of the EP *Metropolis*, Monáe refurbished her alter ego into Jane57821, the protagonist of her 2018 album and short film *Dirty Computer* (Figure 5). Instead of a technological android that is sentenced for disassembly, Jane57821 refuses to follow the rules of an authoritarian government and is consequently captured and her memories, deleted. In the *Metropolis Suites*, the narrative of deviancy and punishment is associated with Cindi's lack of a human body, whereas in the case of Jane, her very human,

is implicated, even with an entire song dedicated to her deviant vagina. In short, Cindi Mayweather is universal insofar as she uses race as a technology to meet the expectations of those around her. Jane57821, on the other hand, is “highly melanated,” fleshy and specific, one-hundred percent authentic “Black girl magic.”⁴⁸ Emphasizing Jane57821’s body as “highly melanated” and labelling her flesh a “dirty computer” puts Monáe’s most recent alter ego in direct conversation with Afropessimism’s heuristic strategy of diagnosing how Black folks are excluded from and a necessary to the category of the human in a white supremacist world.

48:37

Figure 5. “Emotion Picture” for *Dirty Computer* (2018).

“They started calling us computers,” Monáe’s disembodied voice informs us at the beginning of *Dirty Computer*, “People began vanishing and the cleaning began.” Instead of the mythic tale of time travel of the *Metropolis Suites*, *Dirty Computer* gives us an intimate story of dystopian erasure. In the ensuing plot, two white men analyze the “dirty” memories of Jane, a Black woman, and the cleansing they perform highlights an anxiety over her racial construction, her polyamorous sexuality, and gender expression. It is interesting that Cindi is implicated for her android body, whereas Jane is criminalized for her gender and sexuality, things that are so intimately tied to the flesh. And yet, as Jane is implicated for her fleshiness, she is condemned as a “dirty computer.” This seems to be an about-face from the expectations of the previous world in which Cindi was the criminal. It is as though Janelle Monáe, through these two iterations of her alter ego, is creating alternate worlds that express the damned-if-you-do-damned-if-you-don’t double bind of queer Black womanhood.⁴⁹ Monáe’s first EP was released just prior to the 2008 election, a time in which the election of the first Black president inspired post-racial, post-racist optimism.

Dirty Computer was released in a drastically different socio-political climate, with “MAGA” rhetoric, mounting white supremacist terrorism, and hyper visibility of police brutality.

In Monáe’s first studio album, *The ArchAndroid*, we learn that Cindi Mayweather is an android prototype being displayed at an auction where other androids of her model are being sold on the black-market to the highest bidder. In the *Metropolis Suites*, we traverse time and witness Cindi Mayweather use race as a technology to critique class oppression; the antagonists are racially diverse, but always bear upper class signifiers. Rather than time travel, *Dirty Computer* travels temporalities via Jane’s memories, and the function of these memories, rather than providing commentary on class difference, highlight her inescapable Blackness and her queer womanhood (or femaleness), both of which are under attack by the presiding totalitarian regime.

When we are first introduced to Jane57821, she is lying helpless on an inspection table. Through a loudspeaker, she is instructed, “You will repeat after me. Your [sic] name is Jane57821. I am a dirty computer. I am ready to be cleaned.” The voice over the loudspeaker is implicitly white, and so as Jane refuses to repeat the self-indicting phrase, we witness Janelle Monáe’s interpretation of Frantz Fanon’s “third-person consciousness” when he says in *Black Skin, White Masks*:

And then the occasion arose when I had to meet the white man’s eyes. An unfamiliar weight burdened me. The real world challenged my claims. In the white world the [person] of color encounters difficulties in the development of [their] body schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness.⁵⁰

The story goes on to follow two white men searching through Jane’s memories and deleting those that feature Black female eroticism and gender negotiation.

Janelle Monáe dropped “Django Jane,” the second single released from *Dirty Computer*, on February 22, 2018. The song visually positions Monáe as matriarch, monarch, general, and CEO. It is interesting, and a bit ironic, that this song, which puts “Black girl magic” on display and emphasizes Black woman empowerment visually and lyrically, comes from a place of felt precarity. When asked what inspired “Django Jane,” Monáe confides, “It was in response to me feeling the sting of the threats being made to my rights as a woman, as a Black woman, as a sexually liberated woman, even just as a daughter with parents who have been oppressed for many decades.”⁵¹ In this statement Monáe rearticulates a concept that Fanon describes as living in “triple personhood” (different from third-person consciousness of the previous quote). This triple personhood is the burden of responsibility for one’s body, race, and ancestors. Monáe adds an additional layer of responsibility as her alter egoing is not relegated to the past or the present, but the future.

As our heroine raps in "Django Jane" she is surrounded by a posse of Black panther-like ladies. In a suit and heels, she sits atop a throne, her crown a kufi cap.

Jane57821 alter ego articulates a strategy for navigating a world in triple personhood. Monáe's strategy differs from other rappers, such as Nicki Minaj and Cardi B who tend towards parody, irreverence and ratchetness.⁵² Neither does Janelle Monáe entirely embody respectability politics, her suit and tie notwithstanding. Monáe blurs the lines between the ratchet and the respectable, producing a defiant, critical optimism.

Monáe's critical optimism operates on a belief in the inevitability of queer Black womanhood. On some level, this optimism of Black women's future despite the current oppression suffered is similar to Beyoncé's "Formation" music video. Both songs celebrate Black women, Black feminists, and Black feminism. They both include Black girl squads, with both singers as matriarch. Unlike "Formation," however, "Django Jane" speaks not of revenge or the power of money. Even though Django Jane starts the song with a list of tangible economic hurdles and feats, her main focus is the freedom of her female body. Jane ends the song with the command "Take a seat, you are not involved. Hit the mute button, let the vagina have a monologue." Cindi Mayweather uses her robotic dance moves and funk-infused grooves to subvert class oppression and to question normative sexual structures of intimacy, via allegory and metaphor. Jane57821 takes it a step further: she removes the veil and explicitly states that she is a Black girl from Kansas City, whose very body—her vagina and ability to give life—is being policed by men.

Janelle Monáe and Her Flaw in Critical Optimism

Janelle Monáe takes the literalism—"let the vagina have a monologue"—one step further in another of Jane57821's memories under inspection, the song "Pynk." Two months after "Django Jane" was released, "Pynk" was uploaded to Janelle Monáe's YouTube channel. The lowlight, serious aura of "Django Jane" was exchanged for a pink infrared and ultra-femme aesthetic. The overall aesthetic and timbre of "Pynk" greatly contrast with "Django Jane." Janelle Monáe raps the entirety of "Django Jane," whereas in "Pynk" she sweetly sings in her upper middle register. These contrasts notwithstanding, the two songs are united by their vagina monologue motif. The vagina pants dance sequence in "Pynk" is in direct response to "Django Jane's" command, "let the vagina have a monologue" (see Figures 6 and 7). Although the album is dystopic, "Pynk" is brimming with erotic feminine and female metaphors that create a stark contrast to the dark subject matter that is the policing of women's bodies.



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/randy-martin-prize-cover-photo-Larissa-Irizarry.jpg> >

Figure 6. The face of Janelle Monáe, as Jane57821, reflected in a mirror on her lap, as she delivers a “vagina monologue” in “Django Jane.”



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Picture7.jpg> >

Figure 7. Vagina pants in the music video “Pynk.”

The first musical texture in “Pynk” is a bodily act: snapping fingers. As a pink car comes to a stop at a motel, a woman stands to greet Jane57821, one arm akimbo, the other snapping twice. First, we see just one woman snap, but soon others join in. The meaning of the snap is dynamic. It can be used to signal a retort, or express approval. In *Dirty Computer*, snapping is a non-vocal musical expression. The finger snap is often a signifier of agency. Its allowance of participation empowers those who would rather not participate vocally. The snaps of the women at the Pynk motel are acts of communal response. But more than that,

the snapping of the fingers draws attention to tactility and gives way to the body surface as a theoretical medium. In looking at Black women's "disco embodiment/aesthetics," Samantha Pinto analyzes Black women's performative surfaces as ways to theorize Black feminist politics and finds new ways to "[imagine] a politics rooted not in reference to the official, formal spheres of political life—rights, law, public protest, etc.—but in the quotidian and the fantastic registers of Black women's embodied experiences and presences, in their surfaces themselves."⁵³ Like the Sharks' and Jets' attempt to "stay cool" amidst the gang conflict in *West Side Story* (1961), the snapping of the women in "Pynk" commands attention.

As these women press their fingers together and snap, we're given a close shot of the phrase "I grab back" stitched in pink on the front of a pair of white briefs. The song's endearing celebration of Black female eroticism is an act of resistance, the countdown of a ticking clock. Amidst the cheeky world of "Pynk" we are reminded of the real-world dystopia, that is, quotidian misogyny. The pulse of the snaps lasts until the very last line of the song, a steady, unyielding protest enacted from the body. Rather than passive acceptance of misogyny, these women use their bodies, the very thing that is pitted against them, to sonically and visually express critical optimism.

In the tradition of Janelle Monáe, "Pynk" is not a one-dimensional anthem about women's biology, but rather an exploration of the life of Jane, a queer woman of color. Janelle Monáe came out as pansexual the same year that *Dirty Computer* was released.⁵⁴ The story in *Dirty Computer* revolves around Jane's romantic relationship with a man and a woman, Ché and Zen respectively. Jane and Zen's relationship, however, is the relationship featured most prominently, and "Pynk" beautifully illustrates their romance in bubble pop fashion. *Dirty Computer* includes women, men, and non-binary folk, but "Pynk" is a monologue for the vagina.

"Pynk" equating a vagina with womanhood, however, comes with a set of problems. This brings us back to the costume choice, the vagina pants, or "pussy pants." This costume choice is in direct response to Trump's infamous "grab them by the pussy" comment and also to the political debate over reproductive rights. In an interview with MTV News, Monáe states that the pussy pants dance sequence featured at the beginning of the song includes women with and without the pants and that "Pynk" is a song that celebrates women in their varieties.⁵⁵ She further discloses that the women dancing without the pants signify transwomen. And so, while she may be referring to some kind of metaphoric vagina, the act of controlling women's reproduction only directly affects those with reproductive capabilities: some ciswomen, some transmen, and some who are gender non-conforming. So, although this could have a more pointed message regarding reproductive rights and

those with literal vaginas, Monáe's "vagina monologue" conflates gender identity, sexuality, and biology.

This conflation renders transmen's sexual engagements with other men and the possibility of reproduction invisible. This conflation simultaneously and simplistically equates the need for reproductive rights to that of ciswomen. It effectively erases the violence inflicted on transmen by "grab them by the pussy" rhetoric. Ultimately, this ultra-femme call-to-arms falls short of overcoming hegemonic forces that stigmatize transgender embodiment. In other words, Monáe specifically includes women with and without vaginas, but unintentionally excludes transmen and other non-binary people with reproductive capabilities. And despite her references to vaginas, she only includes ciswomen and transwomen in the music video. Thus, Monáe essentially ignores an entire group of people: transmen and their vaginas.

The pussy pants gesture of inclusivity is a signature of Janelle Monáe; unfortunately, this gesture, by conflating vaginas with femme identities, is only inclusive of some trans identities. In the days of Cindi Mayweather, the android messiah was a catch-all heroine representing all "those who are marginalized." Precisely because Cindi Mayweather is all-purpose, a white cis-heteronormative man, for example, may identify and claim her music as representing his experience (if indeed he experiences the violence of surveillance). And in that moment of identification a person who is presumably most privileged may learn to sympathize with a Black non-normative woman who expresses herself through song. Janelle Monáe's attempt at all-inclusivity, from Cindi to Jane, can appear to fall into cultural neoliberal logics, producing heroines that can be consumed by the masses, which Dan Hassler-Forest warns, may run "the risk of separating critique from any specific power formation or set of social relations."⁵⁶ Throughout most of *Dirty Computer*, Jane⁵⁷ portrays a non-universal politic. "Pynk's" widespread identification, an attempt at maintaining some of the universality of Cindi Mayweather, is a deviation from the rest of the emotion picture that emphasizes positionality and specificity.

Janelle Monáe's Critical Optimism in Response to Nationalist Whiteface

"Today, I'm Janelle Monáe. Also known as Dirty Computer. Also known as a free ass motherfucka."

—Janelle Monáe in an interview⁵⁷

"I'm not America's nightmare
I'm the American Dream"

–“Crazy, Classic Life,” *Dirty Computer*

“Cross my heart and I hope to die
With a big old piece of American pie”

–“Americans,” *Dirty Computer*

Monáe is intensely focused on how she is defined—by name, by kind, by spirit—as evidenced by the quote and lyrics above. The ArchAndroid, Electric Lady, Dirty Computer, these are only a few names that Monáe has given herself. In the final track of *Dirty Computer* Monáe defines herself again: American. As the chorus of the song states, this heroine is an American who wants a piece of the American dream (or “American pie”). Ten years prior to the release of *Dirty Computer*, at the 2008 democratic convention, Jay-Z voiced the belief of many hopeful others that “you can be anything you want to be in the world. Black people are no longer left out of the American dream.”⁵⁸ In “Americans,” Monáe sings of the dream that is now available to an American such as herself. In this song Monáe makes an interesting choice in her alter egoing. In an album that is all about Black womanhood, the final track takes on what I call “nationalist whiteface.” Unlike the music videos “Q.U.E.E.N.” and “Mine” discussed earlier, there is no optic or tinted whiteface in *Dirty Computer*. Instead, there is nationalist whiteface in the final number. I define “nationalist whiteface” as rhetoric that implicitly signifies right-leaning white nationalist Americans; post-2016 nationalist whiteface can also be referred to as “MAGA whiteface.”

Monáe’s nationalist whiteface is preceded with the roll of credits, as though the visual album has finished. Ominous waves of synth music feed the dystopian ending: Jane, the “dirty computer,” is cleansed and assimilated into the totalitarian system. The credits cut to the patient monitoring chart of Jane’s male romantic partner, Ché. The digital chart of his brain activity starts to glitch and in walks Jane’s female romantic partner, Zen. The automatic doors open, she walks into the room, face covered with a gas mask, hands behind her back. The camera turns to Jane57821 standing over the prostrate Ché, who just moments before was laying on that very same table. Zen informs Ché, “I am here to bring you from the darkness into the light.” Zen tosses gas masks to Jane and Ché and an alternate ending to the story is initiated as a gospel choir offers hope: “Hold on, don’t fight your war alone.” We witness the downfall of the system that worked so hard to cleanse Jane57821. The non-diegetic chorus of dirty computers declare, “We will win this fight.” Then starts the enactment of nationalistic whiteface, a list of phrases that a liberal left American could (would) ascribe to MAGA culture:

I like my woman in the kitchen
I teach my children superstition
I keep my two guns on my blue nightstand
A pretty young thang, she can wash my clothes
But she'll never, ever wear my pants

As an audience informed by contemporary electoral politics in the United States listens to Jane57821 declare "I pledge allegiance to the flag/Learned the words from my mom and dad/Cross my heart and I hope to die/With a big old piece of American pie," a thick event is generated. Although sung by Janelle Monáe, the audience members assess the content and may assume the speech act emanates from an "all American," white body. As the song continues, it is not clear from which vantage point we are supposed to interpret the following lyric:

Don't try to take my country
I will defend my land
I'm not crazy, baby, naw
I'm American

These lyrics bear a strong right-wing, if not alt-right, sensibility. Perhaps this verse could express how the US has progressed for the better, that indeed, the nation has moved away from this protectionist belief system.

More likely, Monáe is performing nationalist whiteface, impersonating the right-wing conservative American citizen spouting the belief that America, the country that belongs to them (and the accompanying "American Dream" offered) is being taken away (as in Michael Kimmel's critique of white angry men). But, as the song continues, we are brought into someone else's perspective, and they also lay claim to the same America: "Seventy-nine cents to your dollar/All that bullshit from white-collars." These lines from the second verse can be taken up as a response or rebuttal to the first verse and elicit the question, "who is speaking in verse one?" Verse two obviously comes from the perspective of a racialized woman with the lyrics, "Seventy-nine cents to your dollar/ . . . You see my color before my vision/Sometimes I wonder if you were blind/Would it help you make a better decision?" This obvious point of view could make one assume that verse one is coming from the perspective of a white American man. Black women, however, have not just been targets of white male entitlement, but they have also suffered misogyny at the hands of their own Black community. In just these first two verses, each informing the other, "Americans" presents the intersecting hurdles of Black womanhood, as both women and racialized other.

Conclusion

Monáe's Obama-era alter ego manifested as the android, Cindi Mayweather, with unclear origin and convoluted narrative timeline. Cindi Mayweather was rendered a forced metaphor of universality. With the release of the visual album *Dirty Computer* in 2018, Monáe revamped her alter ego into a clearly defined dystopian heroine with a narrative that depended on specificity. Furthermore, Jane57821 makes explicit references to the mounting white (male) nostalgia and anti-Black populisms of MAGA culture in the era of Trump. I understand the evolution of Janelle Monáe's alter egoing as a reaction to these affective political strategies mobilized in electoral politics, and that the transformation of her alter egos are indicative of shared, social feelings that evolve according to contemporary political events.

From Cindi Mayweather wearing a tux to Jane57821 dancing in a pair of vagina pants, Monáe's alter egoing outlines the pros and cons of identification that depend on universality and specificity. The subtle and even dissonant nature of Cindi Mayweather alter egoing exposes the harm of the post-racial fallacy promoted by American politics circa Obama's election and at the same time enables a nuanced performance of gender, race, and sexuality. Jane57821's queer Black female specificity, that somehow also attempts to be a universal icon, inadvertently erases some kinds of transgender identities. Even with the various pitfalls of Cindi and Jane alter egoing, Monáe begins to craft an affective strategy for queer subjects in a heteroracist America. This strategy, critical optimism, is a reflexive process wherein the marginalized subject is aware of the material realities which negate their personhood. Critical optimism modifies Snediker's queer optimism with a bell hooksian' oppositional stance.⁵⁹ Like hooks' political rebellion found in the "looking back" or returned gaze of the racialized subject, critical optimism allows Monáe to craft a unique narrative that defies the futures and outcomes that have been designated to queer Black women in a racist, heteropatriarchal society.

Notes

1. "Talking with Janelle Monáe on Sci-Fi, Androids and Slack (full interview)," CNET Highlights, Jan 15, 2020, YouTube video, 8:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WLHAA-1D2WU> < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WLHAA-1D2WU>> . ↩
2. "Talking with Janelle Monáe." ↩
3. Alex Benson, "The Alien Metaphor: Queer Identity In Modern Music," Medium, April 29, 2019, <https://medium.com/loopandreplay/the-alien-metaphor-f1045ec1ba2a> < <https://medium.com/loopandreplay/the-alien-metaphor-f1045ec1ba2a>> . ↩
4. Janelle Monáe, *Dirty Computer*, Bad Boy Records, 2018. ↩
5. Janelle Monáe, Big Boi, Saul Williams, Wondaland ArchOrchestra of Montreal, and Deep Cotton, *The ArchAndroid: Suite II and III*, Bad Boy Records/Wondaland, 2010; Janelle Monáe, Prince,

- Erykah Badu, Solange, Miguel, and Esperanza Spalding, *The Electric Lady*, Bad Boy Records/Wondaland, 2013; Janelle Monáe, *Metropolis: The Chase Suite I*. Bad Boy Records, 2007. ↩
6. For more on alter egoing, see Larissa Irizarry, "Performing Political Affect: Alter Egos and Black Feminism in Popular Music," PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2022. ↩
 7. Janelle Monáe, *Metropolis: The Chase Suite I*; Janelle Monáe, et al., *The ArchAndroid: Suite II and III*; Janelle Monáe, et al., *The Electric Lady*. ↩
 8. When it comes to identity, specifically identity-oriented analysis, the naming of characters and persons is of utmost importance. What one calls another, or what one calls themselves has the potential to limit or expand the essence of who they are. There may be some confusion when analyzing certain characters in Monáe's works, like "Django Jane," as she can be understood to be both a personality of Jane57821 and a new alter ego altogether. I will not attempt to mitigate this instability of identity, but rather to embrace the resonances and dissonances of multivalent identifications through alter egoing. ↩
 9. Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 121, https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-22-2_79-117 < https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-22-2_79-117>. ↩
 10. Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006). ↩
 11. I use the phrase "white (male) nostalgia," to indicate the historic whiteness of the sentiment "Make America Great Again," and its implicit maleness, as a nostalgic longing for pre-Obama America. ↩
 12. "Janelle Monáe Says 'Q.U.E.E.N.' is for the 'Ostracized & Marginalized,'" Fuse TV, accessed October 27, 2020, <https://www.fuse.tv/videos/2013/09/janelle-monae-queen-interview> < <https://www.fuse.tv/videos/2013/09/janelle-monae-queen-interview>>. ↩
 13. "Janelle Monáe Says 'Q.U.E.E.N.'" ↩
 14. "Janelle Monáe Says 'Q.U.E.E.N.'" ↩
 15. Gillian Andrews, "Janelle < <http://io9.com/5592174/janelle-monae-turns-rhythm-and-blues-into-science-fiction>> Monáe Turns Rhythm and Blues into Science Fiction," < <http://io9.com/5592174/janelle-monae-turns-rhythm-and-blues-into-science-fiction>> July 21, 2010, *io9.com*, <https://gizmodo.com/janelle-monae-turns-rhythm-and-blues-into-science-fiction-5592174> < <https://gizmodo.com/janelle-monae-turns-rhythm-and-blues-into-science-fiction-5592174>>. ↩
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 18. Carpenter, *Coloring Whiteness*, 2. ↩
 19. Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Duke University Press, 2019), 9. ↩
 20. Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 5. ↩
 21. R. Bengal, "'You Don't Own Or Control Me': Janelle Monáe on Her Music, Politics and Undefinable Sexuality," *Guardian*, February 22, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/feb/22/you-dont-own-or-control-me-janelle-monae-on-her-music-politics-and-undefinable-sexuality> < <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/feb/22/you-dont-own-or-control-me-janelle-monae-on-her-music-politics-and-undefinable-sexuality>>. ↩

22. For more on the respectable/ratchet dichotomy amongst Black women of popular culture, see Ashley Payne, "The Cardi B–Beyoncé Complex: Ratchet Respectability and Black Adolescent Girlhood," *The Journal of Hip Hop Studies* 7, no. 1 (July 1, 2020): 26–116, <https://doi.org/10.34718/pxew-7785> < <https://doi.org/10.34718/pxew-7785>> ; Carmel Ohman, "Undisciplining the Black Pussy: Pleasure, Black Feminism, and Sexuality in Issa Rae's *Insecure*," *The Black Scholar* 50, no. 2 (2020): 5–15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2020.1727196> < <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2020.1727196>> . ↩
23. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). ↩
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27. Rebecca Bengal, "'You Don't Own or Control Me': Janelle Monáe on Her Music, Politics and Undefined Sexuality," *Guardian*, February 22, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/feb/22/you-dont-own-or-control-me-janelle-monae-on-her-music-politics-and-undefined-sexuality> < <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/feb/22/you-dont-own-or-control-me-janelle-monae-on-her-music-politics-and-undefined-sexuality>> . ↩
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31. Hamilton, "Black Marvelous," 58–59. ↩
32. Terry Gross, "Janelle Monáe Wants To Represent The Underdog—In Music And Onscreen," *Fresh Air*, May 18, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/05/18/856841290/janelle-mon-e-wants-to-represent-the-underdog-in-music-and-onscreen> < <https://www.npr.org/2020/05/18/856841290/janelle-mon-e-wants-to-represent-the-underdog-in-music-and-onscreen>> . ↩
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34. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto." ↩
35. Alex Benson, "The Alien Metaphor: Queer Identity in Modern Music," *Medium*, April 29, 2019, <https://medium.com/loopandreplay/the-alien-metaphor-f1045ec1ba2a> < <https://medium.com/loopandreplay/the-alien-metaphor-f1045ec1ba2a>> . ↩
36. "Janelle Monáe Says 'Q.U.E.E.N.'" ↩
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